

Herbert Hoover Transcript

Aulenbach: Interviewing Herbert H. Hoover, born February 1, 1927, veteran of WWII Army of the Occupation Germany, in the army, private first class, interviewed February 28, 2011 in Womelsdorf, Pennsylvania, interviewed by Jamie Aulenbach, great niece of interviewee.
What was your life like right before you were drafted?

Hoover: Before I was drafted, I was in high school, in my twelfth year, in Marion Township, and at that time Marion Township only had eleven grades. And I graduated from that school in 1944, and then I had to go to Robesonia High School to get my twelfth year, in which I did. And that was the year that we had to register for the draft, when we were 18 years old. And after being registered with the draft, we had to go to Philadelphia for our physical. There were five of us that were in the same circumstances that I had who were all born in January, February and March, and five of us became eligible with the draft at that time. And because of that, our principal had to get a deferment so that we could finish high school. So June the fourth was our date to be inducted into the army. That gave us about one week after we graduated. Thank goodness for our principal getting us a deferment. They would have taken us out of high school.

Aulenbach: What was your occupation before you were drafted?

Hoover: Well, I lived on a farm in Marion Township. It was just about a mile outside of Womelsdorf, so naturally at that time there was a, we didn't have all the machinery like we did, and I learned to handle all kinds of tools in the farm trade, and was actually a farm laborer at that time. So in the mornings before school, we had our chores to do, feeding the cattle, and the other animals. We had horses on our farm. Chickens, and taking care of them. Bedding them down for the day, with straw, and feeding them. And milking the cows. And when we came home from school we also had to do chores, all the same things again in the wintertime. And in the summertime, my dad would always be approached by the farmers when it was threshing time, and whether he could have us, two of us on the farm, my brother and myself, come out and help with the threshing crews, and I learned to get to know all my neighbors by helping them thresh. We threshed the grain by big threshing machines going from farm to farm at the time. Making hay, bailing hay, plowing the fields, planting in the spring, harvesting in the summer and the fall and all general labor that was needed to be done on the farm.

Aulenbach: What was your reaction when you got your draft notice?

Hoover: Well, we were. We were very emotional about it because everybody thought it was a patriotic duty to be getting behind the war effort, and we were thinking well now it's our turn to be going into the service, and friends of ours that was older than us had to go, so we accepted it, and it was an adventure that we didn't know what to expect from one day to the next, and it was quite inspiring to be going into the service then.

Aulenbach: What was your friend and family's reaction to you getting your draft notice?

Hoover: Well, they didn't tell us how they felt about it, but we had that camaraderie feeling about going into the service, and we hoped that they would be behind us and keep up our morale by writing a letter from home and letting us know on what things were going on. We were naturally going to miss out on all of those things. We didn't. Some of us did get a little home sick at first when we got in the service, but we were so busy we forgot about that after we got there for a while, at basic training.

Aulenbach: How old were you then?

Hoover: I was 18. 18 years old. I was eighteen as of February the first.

Aulenbach: What basic training camp did you go to?

Hoover: We went, when we went in, we had to go to New Cumberland, which was outside of Harrisburg, and we were there for, if I remember correctly, a week, and we got all our uniforms. Socks, shoes, underwear, fatigues, and dress uniforms for the summer time, because it was June and the summer was just starting, so we were wearing what they called summer uniforms then. And when it was time to leave there, we left as a company of men, and we didn't know where we were going to go, had no idea where we might end up, and we took a long train ride, I remember it took at least three four days, and we finally get off the train and find out we were in Georgia. And the nearest city to the camp was Macon, Georgia, and the camp was called Camp Wheeler Georgia, and we found out we were going to start training about three or four days after we arrived, infantry training, to fight in the Pacific. And we would be like a jungle type of training, how to survive and live in that kind of environment.

Aulenbach: Were you trained for any specific type of weaponry?

Hoover: The weapons we were handling were all infantry weapons, which was 30 caliber rifle, which was M1 Garand rifle, it was semi-automatic, the Browning automatic rifle, which was a hand-held rifle that was similar to a machine gun. It was automatic. Also, 30 caliber machine guns, and also, just to get a little familiar background on shooting a bazooka, which was a weapon to shoot a rocket type propel, a weapon for shooting at tanks, for knocking out tanks. And I believe if I remember correctly, yes we had hand grenades. We had to be familiar to handle and throw hand grenades. Also to be on the look-out for booby-traps, not to pick up souvenirs on the battlefield because the enemy would place those there and have them armed so if you pulled a string or something it might go off and blowup in your face. You might lose a limb or two by doing that. And it was to show you how to live in that type of environment, in the jungle-type warfare, and how to survive it.

When the war ended in August, there was no need for us to worry about fighting in a war anymore. So we were sent home at the end of our basic training, and we didn't realize that. We thought that we were going to the Pacific, but when we got to the New Jersey camp, we found out that we were going to be put on a ship in a week or so and we would go to Europe and then up in Germany.

Aulenbach: Okay. What was your job there?

Hoover: Well, there was another surprise when I got there. The first day we had arrived at Le Havre, France after nine days crossing the Atlantic Ocean, we fell out in a group that morning as we were instructed to do the night before. And he said when your name is called out fall out, into another group and then you will be getting on a train, to go to cross over to the south-eastern section of Germany, and there some of you will be put into an infantry outfit, and some of you will be put into an m.p. outfit, and at that time I didn't know where I was really going to be put yet. So after about four nights and three days on the train we arrived at our destination at a place outside of Munich, and I was told after we were assembled there that I was going to the comp to 503rd m.p. Battalion, which was the 3rd army and General Patton was the head of the third army at that time. And this town was a little town on the Swiss-Alps border and this m.p. outfit's job was to be watching, taking care of the military, and being on the lookout because

this was an area where they trained the Nazis, and at this time, I found out that I would be in this m.p. outfit then.

Aulenbach: What was your specific job then?

Hoover: My job then was patrolling, and after I walked foot patrol I tried to get into motorized patrol, which I did and I was accepted. And then I would have a sergeant and I would drive him all over the area, and we were on the on look, looking out for the civilian population, and also for the army personnel to make sure everybody was obeying the rules and regulations. And it was winter time now. It was December when I got there, and I found out that was a very heavy snow area, so we worked so many hours, were off so many hours, and there was a lot of time off for me to enjoy some of the snow and try skiing on my time off, and that's what I did sometimes. I went to the Red Cross, and we had company dances at our billets. By the way, we were put up in a hotel that was evacuated just for us, and that town was known for their mineral baths and was a resort town and there was a lot of hotels in the town. We also found out General Patton had headquarters where the S.S. trained on the outskirts of that town, and I had patrol and I saw the general at our checkpoints at times, and we were always told not to hold up the general when he's patrolling in your area.

Aulenbach: When you were in Germany, I read in a book that there was like, they like bombed a lot. What was the destruction and everything like?

Hoover: Well, fortunately in that town of Bad Tölz, that town wasn't even damaged in the war yet, but there were occasions where I had to make some trips sometimes to pick up mail. Sometimes we were sent up there to get beverages like Coke in the Coke plant. Believe it or not was still in operation, but the city as a whole was in ruins. Munich was really in ruins. So, that was my first experience of seeing the ruined cities. And the Audubon was in good shape except for all the bridges and overpasses were blown up to hold up the enemy from using the Audubon at that time, and I had a chance to patrol the Audubon. It was a super highway in comparison to what we had in the United States.

Aulenbach: Were the people like starving, in Germany?

Hoover: I wouldn't say they were starving, but they didn't have a lot of variety of food. And from my experience of talking to some of the German

people, they would always tell me, they would always say in German, “Kartoffel, kartoffel, kartoffel” which meant potatoes. In other words, they had plenty of potatoes, but there wouldn’t be much variety of fresh vegetables, or canned foods, or things like the people today are used to. They were limited, and they had to be extraordinary cooks to make potatoes taste good. Naturally, they were in an area where they could get fresh eggs and some of that, but it was really tough, really bad for the people to adjust.

Aulenbach: When you were in the service, did you have a lot of contact with friends and family?

Hoover: With my friends? With my family and friends?

Aulenbach: Mmm-hmm

Hoover: Well, when I left basic training in Georgia, and was traveling and taking the ship and the train to get to my destination in Germany, if I remember correctly, I didn’t receive any mail for maybe two months until the mail finally caught up and they finally found out where I was. So then once I started receiving mail then things started on an even basis of getting mail from back home, so it took awhile until it caught up with us.

Aulenbach: Who did you keep in contact with?

Hoover: Well, with my parents. Sometimes I would get a letter or two from my brothers, and then I had a girlfriend who was quite regular with mailing, and it was really a morale-building thing to get letters from home. And thank goodness for my girlfriend’s letters. She was quite regular with sending me mail. I at least got, every week I would get a letter from home through my friend.

Aulenbach: What did you do when you were on leave and for fun and everything?

Hoover: Well, I thought when I saw this ski-slope right outside of town, I thought, why don’t I try to ski, but I didn’t have no ski boots or anything like that, but you could get surplus skis and you could rent skis, so I got somebody, an instructor, to try and teach me the basics of skiing. And then in the spring of the year I found out that we were going to be transferred to a town where they had an outdoor swimming pool, so I told my mother, we

didn't have any way of buying any clothing over there, so I told her to send my swimming suit because I'm hoping to go swimming this coming summer. And before I left Bad Tölz I got a chance to go ice-skating when I went down to visit at Garmish, where the winter Olympics was held, before I was a teenager, and I guess we went, we made a couple trips down to Garmish, and got to see the Mad King Ludwig's Castle on one of my weekends off, which was a nice experience. And at that time, that's about as far as I got when I was in Batoltz area, which was below Munich.

Aulenbach: How did the German people react to American presence in Germany?

Hoover: Well, we had strict orders not to fraternize with the Germans, that includes frauleins and people in general. So we really, unless it was military formats, that we met or talked to any Germans. Although we had a prisoner of war working in our motor pool and I got familiar with him. I practiced my German with him, and we shared a couple beers together and he even shared some of his Luftwaffe uniform and gave it to me one day, he said, "Keep this as a souvenir," and he said, "Maybe your dad could use a farm hand, and maybe I could come to America and work on your dad's farm." But I tell him that I didn't think that would be possible at this time. But he was really a good friend of a German army. And I thought he was in the Luftwaffe and I never talked to him about the war. We tried to talk on after the war experiences.

Aulenbach: So you never had problems with any like, German people like from the Nazis?

Hoover: Never had a problem with anybody. Everybody was respectful, and they honored our presence, and it was amazing that they were the way they were. They accepted, and I think they were just glad the war was over, just like our boys were glad too.

Aulenbach: Were any of your friends from before you went to the service, did any of them get sent to the same places that you did?

Hoover: No, the five of us that went together, I didn't even know where they were, but they must have been in within maybe 50 100 mile radius where I was stationed. I read a letter. I wrote a letter to one when I found out

where he was, and he wrote a couple letters to me, but we never got to see each other, not at that time anyway.

Aulenbach: You mentioned that you drove around people for part of your job. Who did you drive around?

Hoover: Well, at the, towards the end of my service over in Germany, I was a chauffeur for an officer, but before that I was riding motorcycle patrol in the summer time to the Nuremberg War Trials, from the airport to the trials for visiting diplomats that were going to the war trials. That was when I was stationed at Nuremberg. And our billets were in Furth and that city, believe it or not, wasn't destroyed, but Nuremberg was 80% destroyed.

Aulenbach: When you were discharged from the service, were you really relieved to go home?

Hoover: When I came home from Germany, that was in the fall of 1946, I was given an opportunity to stay at home with my parents, and I could earn my board by working on the farm or by paying a little board for room and board, my food and so forth, and was given shelter. And I opted to help my father and mother on the farm until I could find employment then. At that time because the war effort came to a halt, there was no more need for manufacturing the war machinery that was used in the war. All these other veterans that were in before us came home before us, and some of them were given their jobs back to them. And for us that were just coming home, that got in at the end of the war. It was almost impossible to find employment for a long time. But we were allowed to go and get unemployment compensation until we could find work again, and since I really didn't have no outside experience working in a factory or something like that because I was working at home on the farm while I was going to school, so it was a little rough for a while.

Aulenbach: Do you think in any way that the service impacted your life?

Hoover: It definitely did. I think it made a man of me. Taught me a lot of things. I've seen the geography of some of the world. Saw how huge that Atlantic Ocean is, I never had any idea that body of water was as large as it was until I crossed it. I never saw the Atlantic Ocean. Some of my friends that I went to school with used to go to the seashore with their parents in summer vacation, but I never had that opportunity until I actually crossed it.

And seeing what the war, what destruction wars can do was a real eye-opener. I had no idea how much destruction there was, and I think it left me with a broader imprint of how cruel and how bad it really was and I thank God that I was lucky, and I didn't have to participate in the actual war itself, although it was very close to it. If they wouldn't have dropped the atom bomb in August, I probably would have been in the invasion of Japan.

Aulenbach: Did you get any medals?

Hoover: Yeah, I was entitled to three medals, but they never presented them to us. I guess they ran out of medals. One that I could have been wearing was the Good Conduct Medal, and a European Theatre of Operations, and the Victory Medal, because I was in the service at that time. I would have been entitled to those three medals to wear on my uniform.

Aulenbach: When you were in the service, did you always just stay in Nuremberg?

Hoover: No, I was one of the lucky. I guess lucky guys who was getting transferred to different cities while I was, the home company was Nuremberg area. But I was sent out with a group of about twelve men and we were stationed in Stuttgart and I would be with this group for maybe two or three weeks and then they'd return us back to Nuremberg, for regular patrol duty in the Nuremberg area. And then one time they told us "Hey, you want to go along to Karlsruhe?" and I said, "What are we going to do there?"

"Well, don't worry about it. We're going to patrol over there." And that Karlsruhe area is right on the river Rhine. So they said, "You're going to be riding motorcycle patrol over at Karlsruhe."

I said, "Oh, well, that's great, that sounds pretty good." I said, "Where are we going to stay?"

"Don't worry, we're going to get a nice apartment over there."

So one day we get in the convoy, us twelve guys, and we head from Nuremberg to Karlsruhe. And to this day I don't know why they sent us there, but there must be a reason. There must be a reason, and someday I'd like to trace our company how it moved from the front lines of France all the way across Europe with General Patton's third army. And I would just love to retrace the footsteps of the guys that who were there before of what and when and how they did get across to Batoltz, where I joined up with the group. To me that would really be an interesting story, to find that out.

Getting back to this moving around while I was over there, I found myself on another detachment again. They said, "Well, we got to go back to Stuttgart."

I said, "Again?"

"Yeah." So sure enough, there we went, two or three weeks at a time, only about twelve of us. And we were up there for a while and that was a nice city to see. And one day I almost went to the Opera House, but then I thought maybe we won't be accepted, you know, with the Germans, because they loved operas, so I thought maybe I better not go to the Opera House, a military policeman. And that's how I was moving around then, from Stuttgart, to Karlsruhe and back, and finally, towards the end of my stay in Europe, which came in the early part of October, I finally get our shipping orders that we're going to be sent home now. And took the train then from Fürth, Germany, which was a suburb of Nuremberg, and said you're going to Bremerharven, and that took a couple days to get there with the train. And I thought, well maybe if I get up and ride with the engineer and give him cigarettes they can kind of speed this train up so I could get up to Bremerharven, which was the port where we were going to get on the ship. And when I got to Bremerharven I was in a line to go to the mess hall, which was where we were getting food, I guess our evening meal, and who do you think I see in the line for their food, was one of my friends from school, Boyd Stump. And then after I found out that the other guys were there, waiting to get on one of the ships to go home, they were there ahead of me. And I saw a couple of them then. And I said, "Well, I'll see you when we get home." Because I wasn't going on the same ship they were. And I ended up getting home before the other guys, because their ship was quarantined, somebody had typhus or something like that when they got to the New York harbor. So I was probably the first guy home out of the five.